

THE EMMAUS SERIES

26th Sunday Year B

Numbers 11:25-29

James 5:1-6

Mark 9:38-48

Anyone who is not against us is for us

Today's gospel reading from Mark has a lesson as telling today as it was when Jesus was instructing his disciples. The seriousness that characterises groups upholding a religious tradition often becomes exclusive and intolerant. The apostle John reports disapprovingly that they had seen a man 'casting out devils' in the name of Jesus. How precious in the memory of Christian faith is the Lord's response. Authentic faith and discipleship must reflect the inclusive ways of God, proclaimed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Love your enemies ... you must set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father set none to his' (Mt 5:48). 'Anyone who is not against us if for us' – words filled with wisdom and generosity. The Lord is at work in every human heart, and who are we to make judgments that may obstruct the mysterious purposes of God?

The rest of the reading provides an important complement to the great lesson concerning outsiders that has just been given. Those who are within the community of faith have a great responsibility to uphold and protect the truth and values of the Gospel – 'these little one who have faith' are not the children in the community, but members of the community who may be led astray. What are we to make of Jesus' drastic advice to 'cut off' bodily members that may 'cause sin'? If they refer to person morality – the more frequently heard interpretation – they are a reminder that faithful discipleship may call for heroically painful decisions. (As we know, the Semitic forms of expression used by Jesus are surprisingly strong to our ears.) There is a strong case, however, for an interpretation of these words as following on from reference to the 'little ones'. In this interpretation they would refer to exclusion from the community, of persons who would corrupt the faith of insecure believers.

The first reading from Numbers provides a remarkable parallel to the gospel text. Now it is Joshua – the leader who was to succeed Moses and lead the Israelites into their Promised Land – who reacts in too exclusive a fashion. The response of Moses has a timelessness that is breathtaking; it sums up the ideal that should animate any leader of God's people: 'Are you jealous on my account? If only the whole people of the Lord were prophets, and the Lord gave his Spirit to them all!' Prophets are those who speak out in God's name, pointing the way forward to God's people. Vatican II stressed the need to foster such gifts of the Spirit in the Church.

The reading from James reminds us of another exclusiveness, the sense of power and difference that can close off wealthy people from their fellow human beings. Our passage follows an ironic description of the plans of the wealthy. In the spirit of old Israel's Wisdom tradition, it goes on to declare that these grand plans will have no lasting outcome. It is not rich people in the Christian community who are being referred to, but the wealthy and unscrupulous of the surrounding society. Even so, they carry an implicit reminder for believers of the Saviour's words: 'It is harder for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven' (Mt 19:23; see also Paul's rebuke to an early Christian community in which the behaviour of the wealthy was forming 'factions' 1 Cor 11:18-21).

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